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Review: Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach (4th Edition)

Review: *Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach, 4th edition*

William Simkulet

Laura A. Stivers, Christine E. Gudorf, James B. Martin-Schramm, *Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach (4th Edition)*, Orbis Books, New York, 2012, 304 pages, RRP \$26.00.

Case studies offer an engaging and compelling method for studying applied ethics. *Christian Ethics: A Case Method Approach, 4th edition* aims to follow this formula and provide a model for critical thinking and ethical problem solving aimed at undergraduate students. In this, I fear it falls far short of both expectations and its authors' goals.

Traditional case study collections are designed as much to teach students critical thinking and ethical reflection skills as they are to raise the issue of contemporary moral challenges in order to prepare students for handling not just those problems, but unexpected moral questions. Cases deal with moral problems that have no easy, commonsense answers, and the reader is given compelling reasons to support either choice. The goal is for students to pick out morally relevant reasons, identify a subset of those reasons that they find particularly compelling, and be able to take a stance on what the agents in the cases ought to do. Later cases may include red herrings, or multiple moral questions, so as to keep the reader on her toes. This collection bucks this tradition; each of the cases discussed is needlessly complex, riddled with a number of moral dilemmas of varying scale and scope - from trivial to absurd. Often times even the authors seem unclear about which of the moral problems they mean to address in each case. In one case, the authors ask whether a young married couple - David and Linda - should stay together. David, an alcoholic, has recently resumed drinking and beating his wife - because he is unemployed, while Linda - who was sexually abused by her grandfather - hates sex, but asks her friend "Can there be a real marriage without sex?" This case is listed under the heading "Family."

After each case is a commentary section, often times divided into small sections dealing with different moral issues raised in the case. The authors are reluctant to offer substantive, well thought-out recommendations. These sections fail to adopt a common format that more traditional case study collections adopt, where in two authors might take opposing sides of a moral debate, and argue the protagonists in the case ought to act in one way or another, citing reasons and general principles, followed by a third section that contrasts these responses and summarizes the morally relevant details of the case.

One might expect this book to offer a substantive Christian approach to ethics, to cite the virtues or advantages Christianity brings to ethical analysis. This is not the case here. The "Christian" in "*Christian Ethics*" mainly refers to the protagonists featured in the case studies. In many of these cases, the protagonists are the epitome of Christian virtue and compassion whose moral dilemma comes either from competing moral obligations, or from external sources. In other cases, the protagonists are deeply flawed persons, but come ready with an intimate familiarity with church doctrine and history - although often they do not know how to apply this encyclopedic knowledge to the problem at hand. Furthermore, they are often deeply involved with the church and its various support systems. Because the protagonists are often so keenly aware of Christianity's position, authors in the commentary section cannot sensibly appeal to Christian ideals to offer solutions to their problems.

There are 16 cases in this book, each loosely categorized under eight topics - family, violence, poverty, environment, business, health, sexuality, and death. There is a substantial amount of overlap between the topics, a problem exacerbated by the author's tendency raise a cluster of moral problems within a single case. For much of the book, the authors are silent on the big, contemporary moral issues, instead focusing on small clusters of personal and professional problems, many of which have *clear* answers, and few of which would be particularly engaging to students taking either an introductory or advanced course on ethics. Only in the last three cases do the authors discuss euthanasia, abortion, and gay marriage; the rest of the book focuses on substantially less controversial moral dilemmas. This is, perhaps, the great failing of this collection - burying a small subsection of the numerous emerging issues in bioethics at the end of the book. The commentary on the final three cases is one of the high points of this book. The authors make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that these topics are ones about which there can be reasonable disagreement in the Christian community. They offer an evenhanded, well-reasoned analysis of certain biblical interpretations and traditions in a way that stands in sharp contrast to certain hateful stereotypical views that have all too often become synonymous with Christianity in the media.

The most persistent hallmark of this book is that in each of the cases discussed, there is simply far too much going on. The authors bury the central moral problem of most cases under a mountain of unrelated or secondary moral problems - sometimes problems more controversial than the one they seek to focus on. The authors compound this by breaking the cases into nondescript episodes detailing the minutia of the protagonist's journey to deal with one or more of these moral problems, featuring an ever growing cast of characters, often identified by title, first, and last name... and the occasional irrelevant back story. Furthermore, these supporting characters only exist to pile on additional moral concerns that distract from the main issue. In one case a same sex couple is seeking to get married on campus, and we follow them through their various meetings with church and campus officials, all of whom express their support for the couple, but mention challenges *they* face, such as about how the welcoming priest cannot perform a same-sex ceremony without approval from his superiors, or the school administrators who, again, express their desire to help, then express how donations to the school have gone down recently because of complaints about the homosexuality occurring on campus. Fortunately the commentary section of this case deals solely with the issue of same sex marriage, rather than focusing on issues of professional obligation in and outside of the church. Still, this case would have been more direct and compelling had it focused on the issue at hand; perhaps from the perspective of a church official whom has never paid much attention to the church's teachings on homosexuality, but receives a request to marry two upstanding women in his congregation - to each other! We could follow this protagonist as he gets advice from other professionals that he works with, and as he researches what Christian and secular moral scholars have said on the subject. Such a case could have been followed by nearly the same commentary section, and yet would raise the relevant moral questions more succinctly.

I cannot recommend this book as the cornerstone of an applied ethics course, but it is worth noting that several of the commentaries - notably the last three - offer a fair and responsible Christian analysis of some of the most important and controversial moral questions often discussed in such courses. This analysis contrasts nicely with the over-simplified, stereotypical, and too often rigidly dogmatic treatment of these topics that have unfairly and unfortunately become associated with Christianity - a stance that some introductory students take as uncontroversial, and sometimes raise. If the authors craft cases with a sharper focus, and structure the commentary with the same focus and diligence as the commentary found in

the last few examples, future of editions of this work would be better suited to engage students compared to this volume that drowns them in a pile of moral dilemmas ancillary or unrelated to the ones the authors mean to discuss.